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ABSTRACT

This teaching guide offers lesson plans and student assignments based upon Louise Erdrich's novel, "Love Medicine," a celebration of Chippewa culture which raises an abundance of literary and artistic issues and which also poses numerous sociological and political questions. Included are an introduction to the work, a glossary of literary terms, a biography of the author, an analysis of the novel's structure and theme, suggested questions and topics for writing and discussion, and a conclusion. A section entitled "Using Poetry with the Novel" employs Erdrich's poem "Jacklight" to highlight themes found in "Love Medicine." (SG)

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USING LOVE MEDICINE IN THE ENGLISH 102 CLASSROOM:

A STUDY GUIDE AND RESOURCE MANUAL

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Rutgers-Newark
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INTRODUCTION

Love Medicine, a novel by Louise Erdrich, is not only a celebration of a culture which has been virtually forgotten (if not completely decimated) but also a tribute to the human spirit. Its richness in terms of language, imagery, characterization and character development, and theme make it ideal material for the 102 classroom. In addition to an abundance of literary and artistic issues, the novel also poses sociological and political questions. These questions, while they begin with and remain focused on the Chippewa, transcend ethnic boundaries and ask the reader to consider their universal implications.

Love Medicine spans four generations of two Native American families, the Kashpaws and the Lamartines. Set on a Chippewa reservation in North Dakota, the novel portrays a large cast of characters who represent a broad spectrum of both Native American and American cultural experience. The problems of daily life and their solutions originate with two extraordinarily strong women who readers come to appreciate as the matriarchs of the tribe: Lulu Lamartine, granddaughter of the tribe's shaman, who remains rooted in the land despite pressures from within the tribal council and from the U.S. government; and Marie Lazarre Kashpaw, part Chippewa, who elevates her husband to the position of chief and who struggles to raise her extended family in the face of alcoholism, poverty, and alienation. The book is united by the act of remembering, and what everyone is remembering is June Kashpaw, who dies in a snowstorm in Chapter One, a scene which immediately calls for the recognition of culture clash and the failure of acculturation.

GLOSSARY OF LITERARY TERMS

The glossary is intended to provide an introduction to important literary terms in order to invite analysis of the text and consideration of narrative strategies available to student writers as well as the author. These particular literary terms were chosen because they raise important critical issues in relation to Love Medicine.

imagery: descriptive details that appeal to the senses; imagery involves the pictorial power of language to capture the world of sensory experience, e.g. Erdrich's use of snow and snowstorms to evoke isolation, struggle and to situate the novel geographically.

myth: a traditional story, often a folktale, arising out of a culture's oral tradition; myths provide cultures and writers with interpretations of the world's events and transmit the culture's values and beliefs from generation to generation

narrative: a sequence of events often (but not always) unified and connected in storytelling

narrator: the teller of a story; usually either a character who participates in the story's action or a detached, anonymous observer

point of view: the perspective from which the author has the reader view the action

theme: the central or controlling idea or ideas in a work of literature

tone: the expression of a writer's attitude toward the subject

unity: the pattern and coherence of a story. Example of a question for discussion: What holds the novel together? Why are we able to read LM as a novel rather than a collection of individual stories?

BIOGRAPHY

Louise Erdrich was born in Little Falls, Minn., in 1954 and grew up in Wahpeton, North Dakota. She is of German and Chippewa descent and belongs to the Turtle Mountain Band of Chippewa. LM (1984), Erdrich's first novel to be published, is sequentially last in the cycle which includes Tracks (1988) and The Beet Queen (1986). It should be noted that Erdrich's novels are a rare phenomenon among minority writers--they are at once best sellers and critical successes. In addition to her three novels, Erdrich has published two volumes of poetry, Jacklight and Baptism of Desire. She lives in New Hampshire with her husband/collaborator, Michael Dorris.

THE NOVEL'S STRUCTURE AND THEME

LM is a group of stories published together as a novel, bound by a commonality of themes and characters. The narrative voice shifts from chapter to chapter, allowing the voices of several characters to be heard. Erdrich has disrupted chronological time in order to reflect the disjointedness and fragmentariness of her characters' lives. Individually each story (chapter) stands on its own, but the layering of multiple points of view increases the power and meaning of the narrative; in other words, the stories are more powerful and meaningful when seen as a group. This structure reflects the Native American belief that the collective is more important than the individual. The idea that structure is intimately connected with theme in this novel is a useful teaching tool.

The basic question posed by the novel is, "What does it mean to be a Native American in contemporary society?" The answer is complex and can only be accessed through the constantly shifting narrative, which represents a multiplicity of themes. Some of the themes are universal; others are specifically related to Native American culture. The themes raised include alienation, rootlessness, disintegration of the family; the importance of the ancestor, the role of storytelling (the oral tradition) and myth, the healing

power of love, the role of community and kinship structures.

FAMILY TREE

Because of the large cast of characters in LM, it is very worthwhile to devote class time, at the start of discussions, to determining who's who and their importance in the novel.

QUESTIONS AND TOPICS FOR WRITING ASSIGNMENTS AND CLASSROOM DISCUSSION

1. What have you come to understand about the culture of many Native Americans that may have encouraged Erdrich to employ so many different voices in her novel?

2. Why did Erdrich choose the title, Love Medicine?

3. June Kashpaw has left a profound impression on many characters in the novel. Marie describes her as if "she really was the child of what the old people call the Manitious, invisible ones who live in the wood . . ." Does June have a special spiritual quality? Do her children inherit it?

4. Gerry Nanapush is described as "both a natural criminal and a hero whose face appeared on the six o'clock news." At first glance this statement appears contradictory. However, the author has allowed Gerry to be both hunted and honored. How? Why?

5. LM closes with Lipsha Morrissey going "home." Where is his home and what enables him to be content with the idea of returning there? (Do not limit yourself by thinking in terms only of the reservation.)

6. What is the role of myth in the novel? What are some popular American myths? Is it true that in America hard work always brings success? Were cowboys always brave? Consider the impact of myths on stereotyping.

SUGGESTED TOPICS FOR CRITICAL ESSAYS

The goal of these essays is not only to teach research mechanics but to help student writers learn how to bring readings to bear upon one another. Students are not expected to conduct exhaustive research on Chippewa or other Native American tribes. Outside research is intended only as additional support for their critical arguments. Students should be encouraged to use the novel as their primary source and their own ideas and interpretations as the main focus of the paper. Some of the most successful papers are ones in which students look beyond the reservation experience and make connections with global problems. This approach encourages

students to question their own assumptions, a process which manifests itself both in their thinking and in their writing.

1. the role of women
2. ceremonies and rituals; the power of the shaman
3. alcoholism (caveat: students should be discouraged from doing a statistical analysis of alcoholism among the Native American population)
4. tribal religion and Christianity
5. storytelling and myth
6. homelessness and sense of place (who owns the land?)
7. suicide
8. acculturation (insider/outsider)
9. children and family
10. the ancestor
11. the Hollywood image of the American Indian versus the reality
12. the Indian brave and the American marine

USING POETRY WITH THE NOVEL

The use of poetry allows the instructor to focus the important thematic issues of the novel in the time frame of a single class period. Poetry can also be used as a springboard to more difficult issues such as institutionalized racism and the importance of pluralism. The explication of poetry asks students to become familiar with literary terms and see the importance of writing strategies.

"Jacklight," by Louise Erdrich (© 1983 Louise Erdrich)

We have come to the edge of the woods,
out of brown grass where we slept, unseen,
out of knotted twigs, out of leaves creaked shut,
out of hiding.

At first the light wavered, glancing over us.
Then it clenched to a fist of light that pointed,
searched out, divided us.
Each took the beams like direct blows the heart answers.
Each of us moved forward alone.

We have come to the edge of the woods,
drawn out of ourselves by this night sun,
this battery of polarized acids,
that outshines the moon.

We smell them behind it
but they are faceless, invisible.
We smell the raw steel of their gun barrels,
mink oil on leather, their tongues of sour barley.
We smell their mothers buried chin-deep in wet dirt.
We smell their fathers with scoured knuckles,
teeth cracked from hot marrow.
We smell their sisters of crushed dogwood, bruised apples,
of fractured cups and concussions of burnt hooks.

We smell their breath steaming lightly behind the jacklight.
We smell the itch underneath the caked guts on their clothes.
We smell their minds like silver hammers
cocked back, held in readiness
for the first of us to step into the open.

We have come to the edge of the woods,
out of brown grass where we slept, unseen,
out of leaves creaked shut, out of our hiding.
We have come here too long.

It is their turn now,
their turn to follow us. Listen,
they put down their equipment.
It is useless in the tall brush.
And now they take the first steps, not knowing
how deep the woods are and lightless.
How deep the woods are.

CONCLUSION

The novel debunks widely-held myths and stereotypes about Native Americans: peace-loving or warlike, savages or seers. Readers come to understand that mythologizing Indians devalues them as individuals and destroys their humanity. One of the main points of the book is to invite readers to consider the contributions of Native Americans, among them the experience of pluralism. According to Michael Dorris, "There is one common experience that Indian people across the hemisphere have that Europeans by and large lacked. And that is the experience of pluralism, of cultures that developed in an atmosphere in which they were surrounded by other cultures. That's the world."

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